

A NOVEL OF INTEREST TO EUROPE

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XAVIER BRU DE SALA AUTHOR





During the years of the Franco regime, the European public showed no interest at all in the cultural products that came from Spain, and so far as the novel was concerned, much preferred everything that came from Latin America. So it is only fair that in the last few years, with the new situation and our full integration in Europe, people should begin to acquaint themselves with the cultures that make up the Spain of today, amongst them the forgotten one, that of Catalonia. And not only as an act of reparation or of justice, but for its real interest, for the quality of its work, which can perfectly well be put alongside the work of the rest of European cultures. One only has to suppose that alongside Picasso, Dalí or Miró there must be writers who are worth reading. And it is worth discovering just how true this is by delving into the world of *Vida privada*, now that the publishers "Acropole", of the Pierre Belfond group in Paris, are putting it on the market; now that a French-Italian-Spanish film and television coproduction is preparing to project its characters into the grand ball of today.

To understand *Vida Privada* and its author, we have to go back a bit in time. While the Europeans were torturing each other at Verdun, the Catalans, thanks to Spain's neutrality, devoted themselves to doing business with the contenders, who need everything and had nothing. In this way, vast sums of money were accumu-

lated which, once the war had finished, ran like rainwater through the streets of Barcelona and, before ending up in the sea, brought about a period of happiness and cosmopolitanism which made the city shine in its own light.

Josep Maria de Sagarra i de Castellarnau (Barcelona, 1894-1961) was one of the writers who triumphed in this Barcelona: the public constantly filled the theatres where his plays were put on; his poems, lyrical or cruelly satirical, were passed from hand to hand, from mouth to mouth; his personality shone to the admiration of one and all.

And in 1932, soon after the end of the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera and the advent of the republic, *Vida Privada* appeared, a colourful portrait of Barcelona society in the gay twenties. As in a great mosaic or a huge circus frieze, the characters that parade through *Vida privada* show us the milieu and the attitudes of the decadent aristocracy, of the church plotting to strip it of its last legacies, of the triumphant bourgeoisie, powerful and uncontrolled, of the poor parts of the city—the same ones that Mandiargues and Genet have described, here seen through the eyes of a "connoisseur" who shows them in their true multi-class light—the "private" vices of the rich and the curtains they hide behind and, above all, the hardness of life, the breaking of the secular codes of relations and the triumph of cynicism and of the sensual pleasure

that accompanies the ascent of the social ladder.

With this material, warm and pulsating like the entrails of an animal slit from top to bottom, and with the narrative vigour of the young iconoclast intellectual and at the same time with the nostalgia—of a clearly Proustian origin—of the aristocrat who sees his world falling apart for ever, Sagarra created one of the most impressive works of the whole of Hispanic literature of the first half of this century. And, without a doubt, the most interesting modern Catalan novel for European or American readers. And now, the first which will have the chance to connect with a public of many millions.

To use his own words, Sagarra always tried to say "things as directly as possible and with the most expeditious method possible", so that "the shock of emotion and total understanding is produced quickly". A good recipe for any best-seller writer, made out many years *avant la lettre* by a writer who combined the utmost refinement of culture—it is enough to mention only that he produced masterly Catalan translations of almost all of Shakespeare and *The Divine Comedy*—with an extraordinary vitality of aristocratic country origin drawn straight from the land, all of which made him an implacable observer of urban life, of the dense network of interests and tricks that make up the rise of any city, in this case, the Barcelona of *Vida privada*. ●

Vida privada

JOSEP M. DE SAGARRA

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he eye-lids made a barely perceptible click as they opened, as if they were stuck together because of an earlier coexistence with tears and smoke, or with the secretion produced by eyes that are irritated after a long session of reading without enough light.

The little finger of the right hand stroked the lashes, as though quickly combing them, and the pupils tried hard to make things out. In fact, the vision was a panorama of cloudy semi-liquid shadows without any clear shape to them: what a man dazzled by the outdoors sees when he goes into an aquarium. In the middle of the shadows, a sort of long, vaporous knife stood out, the colour of the juice of squashed oranges in the port. It was a ray of light coming through the crack in the shutters, and turning sour in the stuffy air inside the room.

It must have been about half past four in the afternoon. The man with the suffering eye-lids, Frederic de Lloberola, was waking up as he always did. No-one had called him, no sound had woken him; his nerves had had enough of sleep; he had got all he could out of an absurd, faded dream, one of those that people have when nothing happens in life, and that are so difficult to remember afterwards.

It took Frederic less than eight seconds to get a grip on reality.

On the bare tiles there were pieces of his clothing, painful in their disorder, mixed up with net stockings and a woman's cotton blouse that was deflated and, moreover, dirty.

The four chairs were full of things of hers; the little dressing-table was loaded with bottles, powder-puffs, tweezers and scissors, and the open cupboard looked like a sinister fairbooth, the dresses and coats on the hangers, with all their colours and ornamentations, giving the impression of extremely thin fairground princesses who had been decapitated and had fish-hooks stuck in their throats. On top of the cupboard, empty hat-boxes slept, coated in dust, side by side with a stuffed dog. This dog had fallen into the hands of an incompetent taxidermist, who had stuffed it atrociously, leaving all the stitches showing between the hair and the wounded belly. Its mistress had adorned its neck with a piece of old-fashioned garter livened up with three tiny satin roses, like three drops of blood (...)

Translated by Andrew Langdon-Davies